

RABIES

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the central nervous system. The virus is usually passed to humans via the bite of a rabid animal. Occasionally rabies can be transmitted if the saliva of an infected animal gets into a fresh scratch, break in the skin, or contact with mucous membranes (eyes, mouth, nose).

Who gets rabies?

Human rabies is rare in the United States (U.S.). The latest human rabies case in California occurred in April 2002. Currently in the U. S., the majority of human cases are caused by rabid bats. Any mammal can contract rabies. In California, most cases of rabies occur in skunks and bats. Domestic animals account for three percent of animal rabies, and the rest occurs in a variety of wild animals, including foxes. Independent transmission cycles in skunks and bats maintain the virus in nature in California.

What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

In humans, symptoms of rabies appear an average of three to eight weeks after exposure to the virus. Symptoms may appear as soon as nine days and as long as a year or more after a bite or other exposure. Early signs in humans are nonspecific and include fever, headache, and general malaise. As the disease progresses, neurological symptoms appear, including insomnia, anxiety, confusion, partial paralysis, excitation, hallucination, hypersalivation, and difficulty swallowing due to paralysis of throat muscles. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

How can I tell if an animal has rabies?

Symptoms in animals vary with the species and stage of the disease, but abnormal behavior is the most obvious sign to people. Special signs to watch for include:

- Wild animals that seem unusually tame or unafraid, and approach people in an uncharacteristic manner.
- Nocturnal animals such as skunks, foxes or bats, that are active during daylight.
- Pets that have difficulty walking, eating, or drinking. Or pets whose personalities change, or whose voice tone changes.
- Signs of excitement or viciousness in normally quiet animals.
- Bats that are unable to fly or have been caught by a domestic dog or cat.
- Cattle that "strain" for a long period of time or "bellow" (vocalize) excessively.

The sick animal may go through one or more stages: 1) "furious" stage (viciousness, vocalization, snapping, drooling, chewing on fences, or swallowing strange objects such as stones); 2) "dumb" or "paralytic" stage (difficulty swallowing, drinking or walking, choking or flaccid paralysis); and 3) a combination of both stages. Finally the whole body becomes paralyzed and the animal dies.

If an animal displays suspicious behavior, avoid contact with it. Notify your local animal control agency immediately.

What control measures are in place to prevent rabies?

The California Rabies Prevention and Control Program requires vaccination and licensing of dogs. The program works to control stray domestic animals. Trained professionals follow up on potential human exposures. Because cats are the most frequently reported rabid domestic animal in the U.S., vaccination of all cats is also strongly advised. There are vaccines for other domestic animals as well. The program also keeps track of animal rabies throughout the State.

What can I do if I think I have been exposed to rabies?

If you are bitten or scratched by a rabid or possibly rabid animal, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and warm water and immediately consult a physician. The physician will decide if anti-rabies treatment is necessary. If so, the treatment should be started as soon as possible. Veterinarians and their staff, animal control workers, and wildlife rehabilitators are at high risk and should be vaccinated as a preventive measure against rabies. Local health departments can be consulted to help evaluate the need for rabies immunization.

What if a wild animal bites my pet?

If a wild animal bites your pet, use gloves to prevent contacting the wild animal's saliva. Contact your veterinarian and local animal control officer as soon as possible. Any animal bitten by a wild animal that is not available for testing is considered as having been exposed to rabies. Unvaccinated dogs and cats exposed to a rabid animal should be euthanized immediately. If you are unwilling to do this, the animal must be immediately vaccinated and put in strict isolation for six months. Dogs and cats with rabies vaccination need immediate re-vaccination and then strictly isolated for 30 days.

What if my pet bites someone?

Immediately notify the local health officer or designee. The law requires that the local health officer be contacted when any person or animal is bitten by, or potentially exposed to, a rabid or suspected rabid animal. In addition, the local health officer must be notified when an animal bites any person. People possibly exposed to rabies are evaluated and the decision is made whether or not anti-rabies treatment is necessary. Domestic dogs or cats that bite humans must be placed in strict confinement. (The local health officer defines strict confinement.) The animal is observed daily for ten days following the bite for signs of rabies, regardless of the animal's vaccination status. Alternatively, biting animals may be immediately euthanized and tested for rabies at an approved public health laboratory. If the isolated dog or cat is healthy after ten days, there is no risk of a rabies exposure from the original bite wound.

What can I do to help prevent the spread of rabies?

Be a responsible pet owner. Keep rabies vaccinations up-to-date for all cats and dogs. Take your pet to your veterinarian on a regular basis. Maintain control of your pets by

keeping them under direct supervision. Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or vaccinated regularly. Lastly, call animal control to remove all stray animals from your neighborhood since these animals may be unvaccinated or ill.

Avoid contact with unfamiliar animals. Enjoy wild animals from a distance. Do not handle, feed, or attract wild animals. Place litter in closed garbage cans. Never adopt or bring wild animals into your home. Teach your children to never handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. Prevent bats from entering areas where they might come in contact with people or pets. When travelling abroad, take extra care to avoid animals, especially dogs in developing countries, where rabies is common.

Where can I get more information regarding rabies?

The California Compendium of Rabies Control and Prevention is available on the Department of Health Services' website, under the Veterinary Public Health Section <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/dcdc/disb/disbindex.htm>.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has a useful website: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies>.